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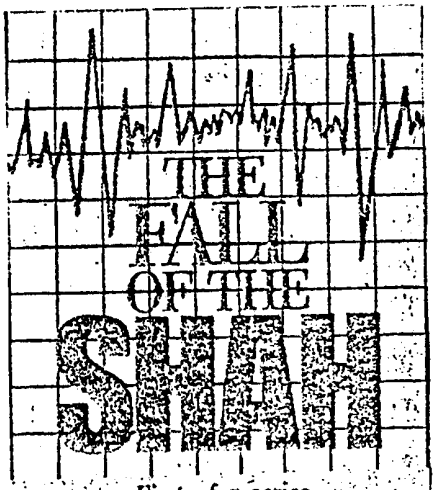
Carter Held Hope Ev
Shah Had Lost



First of a series

By Scott Armstrong
Washington Post Staff Writer

During the revolutionary turmoil that pulled down the shah of Iran, President Carter clung to the belief that the shah could be saved, even though the shah himself had lost faith in his own power, a five-month investigation by The Washington Post has found.

Two months before the shah fled to exile, when Iran was aflame with protest, the president's national security adviser personally telephoned the Iranian ruler, urging him to use military force to smother the revolution.

A few weeks later, the president was advised to abandon the shah by an outside foreign policy expert whom he called in for counsel. Tell the shah to take a long vacation, the president was told, and begin preparing for a new government in Iran. The president said he couldn't do that to an important allied leader and wouldn't.

Indeed, in that same period, State Department sources say they worked to soften the draft of a message from Carter to the shah, urging again the use of force against the domestic opposition, although the White House insists that no such message was ever sent. Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance and his top aides feared such a message would lead only to considerable bloodshed and possibly civil war, turmoil that could only worsen America's position in the future of Iran.

The president held to his hope, even when most of his top foreign policy advisers were urging him to ease the shah off his throne and begin the transition to whatever political forces would follow in power. In the final weeks, the U.S. ambassador in Tehran, once one of the shah's staunchest supporters, cabled his exasperation to Washington. The president's attitude, he said, was "shortsighted and did not understand where the U.S. interests lie."

One month later, in any case, the shah was gone, permanently exiled. While the American president was surrounded by conflicting counsel on whether the peacock throne could be saved, one person, ironically, who knew with certainty that the shah was doomed was Mohammed Reza Pahlavi himself.

The shah, notwithstanding his reputation as a bloodthirsty tyrant, disregarded eleventh-hour advice from Washington to get tough with street demonstrators and opposition leaders. He was convinced in his own mind that force could not prevail for long. He knew that he was slowly dying of cancer and was anxious to leave behind a stable nation that his young son could rule. Finally, confused by conflicting signals from the United States and pressured by European leaders to abdicate, the shah in his last month in power moved to accommodate the moderate opposition, to live with some dissent and relinquish some of his vast powers.

[illegible] accused of abandoning the shah prematurely. In fact, Carter still hoped to preserve the shah's power long after intelligence reports and top foreign policy advisers insisted, as a matter of realism, the United States must assist the orderly transition to whatever political forces were going to displace the peacock throne.

This much is certain: The fall of the shah involved a bitter though collegial contest among the president's key advisers, contending for control over foreign policy and veering back and forth in their prognoses for events, stalemating policy with their disagreements.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president's national security adviser, appears intransigent in this account, stoutly resisting the "unthinkable" outcome that lay ahead, demanding the toughest policy line and ultimately prevailing over others who saw the future more clearly.

Vance, preoccupied with other matters, arms talks with the Soviet Union or the Egyptian-Israeli peace talks, was strangely inattentive to the alarm bells within his own department until it was too late to make a difference.

And the U.S. intelligence community, once again, seems badly out-of-focus in perceiving the realities of popular discontent within an allied nation. Some in government did see the picture in Iran clearly, but their perceptions simply did not get through to the president and his policymakers, especially if their distasteful warnings collided with the established official view.

Still, this is not just diplomatic history. The events in Washington and Tehran that presaged the triumph of the Iranian revolution remain with us still as unresolved complications in the hostage crisis and the future of relations with Iran. Until one knows all the

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